# Come on guys – getting federal transport infrastructure policy right

They say in Japanese game shows: ‘many obstacles; pretenders aplenty; champions few’.

How true for transport infrastructure policy, a topic of late due to Opposition and Government announcements.

First, the nice bit. Both sides deserve some credit. Labor: a credible start to the conversation via the redoubtable Sir Rod Eddington. The Coalition: wanted an audit.

Sir Rod and his Infrastructure Australia Council were adamant: getting the basics right was the number one priority. Still is. Policy then projects. To their eternal credit they shamed some dumb proposals out of existence.

The Coalition’s newer Infrastructure Australia appears more lenient; quieter about disquieting aspects of infrastructure mania. Virtually proclaiming a crisis yet its comments about the need to change don’t get traction. There are problems with their audit; but it slowed the initiative from less responsible hands.

Neither they, nor their Governments, grasped two nettles: what to do about stupid proposals not submitted to Infrastructure Australia? what is the Commonwealth’s role?

Fair enough to date. Who wants to break into jail?

Now someone should. We have heard enough idiot ideas to sink, well, a prosperous economy. And post Howard any idea of a real Commonwealth position seems to disappearing; certainly it was invisible at Abbott’s leaders retreat.

Lets not slam State or spiv generated barrelled pork for the moment. And look at national leaders.

You may not have agreed with them, but we all knew where the Commonwealth stood on infrastructure under Whitlam, Keating and Howard. Whitlam: if the States don’t do it the Commonwealth will. Keating: the Commonwealth leads Australia and will complete the work of federation. Howard; the Commonwealth has no business fixing congestion.

What now? The story goes: States can’t afford infrastructure so the Commonwealth should donate under the guise of ‘partnership’. National government as piggy bank. The safeguard: Infrastructure Australia, supposed to ensure the burning platform for infrastructure doesn’t turn the pig into pork.

The logic: those poor old States aren’t making a good enough fist of it. The feds need to save you, me, indeed the nation from the inability, even malaise, of the States. Time to step in and back a few projects flung at them by ….. the States. Hey what?

Why not look at all projects? Not just the ones the States might allow someone else to privately see.

If the States, ahem, don’t tell the whole truth ala East West Link… or if things start looking like they have a life of their own, for example a rail line extension needing a harbour crossing needing a downtown tunnel needing to take over a suburban line etc… say something like: its a good idea, it’s a bad idea or we have no idea.

Does it matter? When you have spare time in your next traffic jam or as you fume at utility bills consider this possibility: maybe some projects are wrong ideas, at wrong places, at wrong times for which you are paying over the odds via charges and taxes.

True you can drive to holiday resorts a bit quicker. Up to you my friend, I’m retired and am taking time to smell the …. bacon.

It’s your money the feds are using to pay for entry to the infrastructure fairground. Yep, not Commonwealth funds but public monies. They owe it to you to take all the rides and tell you everything about the experience.

So challenge 1: how to deal with stupid projects. The excuse a few years ago was not breaking into gaol; today, after a number of fiascos, is it weakness?

Challenge 2: Commonwealth’s role. As the press put it: a concrete bank? A bigger bob the builder? Bob the broker? Vestiges of the socialist dream and a friendly wicket, again, for the super industry?

Plus a ‘top 10’ projects, Coalition and Labor lists differ, of course. All States covered, few ideas assessed. Put it all together and you get what; more spotted infrastructure? We’ve waited 115 post federation years for this?

A Gough, and maybe a Bob and Paul, would be enraged by the lack of ambition. Fraser or Howard despondent at the entanglement.

Labor’s latest is a good start. But too conservative. The Commonwealth should take over transport infrastructure it funds. Own it. Step up. Even Howard took over some railway. As Don Vito would put it; be an infrastructure man. Not, as Arnie might quip; an infrastructure girlie man.

‘Oh!’ you say: ‘the States will whinge about intrusion’. Whatever happened to the expression: ‘boo-frickety-hoo’?

If the Commonwealth is beholden to the States, if it needs their love, if it cannot see its distinct purpose, then deal with its weakness. Address the whining about ‘my share’ of funds; drop the infrastructure word, and give infrastructure budget to the Grants Commission to dole out.

As for the current conservatives; the Minister thinks there is a problem in an adviser distributing funding. Who told him? The Department that has been doing this for years? The less said the better. Let’s hope the new Prime Minister is above this, or at least has more than: ‘all aboard the iron pony’ and a bit of nation building.

Come on guys (all are blokes - is that the problem?) lift your game. Maybe read some High Court decisions about the Commonwealth. Get up to date!

As they say at the end of Japanese game shows: ‘the stench of disappointment fills the air. But tomorrow brings fresh opportunity’.

All the best.

J Austen

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Ps: I’d appreciate someone fixing my computer’s ctrlf: so it finds a few more mentions of ‘defence’ in the national infrastructure audit vol.1.